

May 26, 2019

“Mythbusters: Everything Happens For a Reason”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, Romans 8:18-39

We’re right in the middle of a 5-week series in which we name and BUST a few MYTHS; myths circulating in our culture and – more surprisingly – in the Church. As we’ve been saying, these myths often begin with a kernel of truth from a few Bible verses, but then get developed and deployed in unhelpful ways . . . often when people are going through very difficult and painful circumstances.

Last week Jason busted the myth that “God will never give you more than you can handle.” If you weren’t here, please go online to check it out or grab a hard copy after the service. I am well aware Jason ruffled some feathers last week. Initially, it’s disappointing and frustrating when what we’ve held onto for many years – been told by and said to others – gets exposed as a flimsy half-truth that actually does more damage than good. But who wants to perpetuate and pass on something that isn’t true? Or helpful?

Before I address this week’s myth, let me tell you a few of the things I/we absolutely believe. God is sovereign. God has a plan; both a large-scale plan for all of creation, and one for us as individuals. And God is good; the giver of good gifts. Having said that, let’s bust another myth.

“Everything happens for a reason.” Everything? Really? Ever had someone say this to you? Ever said it to someone else? As I said two weeks ago, I hear this one all the time.

I believe that some good things “clearly” happen for a reason – because they fit into God’s good plan of redemption and rescue and restoration. But what and how things happen may be more fluid and less forced than some envision when they say this. I don’t know for sure how it works, but I know God often helps connect people, opportunities and resources to carry out His Kingdom plans. It happens a LOT!

Shelly and I weren’t yet married when I started my second year at Princeton Seminary. So I was still in the dorms when September of 1989 rolled around, there to welcome two new students across the hall. One of them was a Michigander and Italian named Todd Cioffi. After a little small talk I asked him and his roommate, Gary, if they had a field education assignment yet. They didn’t. “Do you want to be student chaplains with me at Trenton State Prison?” They did! So every Wednesday and most Sundays, we’d drive 30 minutes to provide pastoral care and worship opportunities for men who were doing serious time; some of them life sentences.

Todd went on to get his Ph. D and actually teaches in the ministry department at Calvin College, where our son Michael graduated from last weekend. I knew Todd was teaching at Calvin but it wasn’t until this past January that I found out he was the Director of the Calvin Prison Initiative, teaching inmates in a Grand Rapids area prison so they can earn an actual college degree from

Calvin in Ministry Leadership. We caught up after the graduation and I learned more about the program. [I'll tell you more about that later.] When I got back in the office on Tuesday, an email from Todd was waiting for me. At one point he said, *“As I reflected on our meeting on Saturday, I was so thankful that you just happened to stop by my dorm room and ask if I had any interest in working in a prison. Who, but God, knew that many years later I would spend a good portion of my work in a prison. Thanks for planting the seed!”* “Who, but God!” Some amazing things happen for a reason, and God is the author of many such happenings or seed plantings that produce fruit. He does it all the time!

Many not-so-good things also happen for a reason; because of the sin and brokenness in us and others. I could give endless examples. But there are some painful and difficult things we cannot find a reason for. And, yet, we feel compelled to say, “Everything happens for a reason,” often, to put a positive spin on life – not really thinking of the deeper implications.

Most of the time we say this in the context of something painful. As Jason said, we often voice this “because we don’t know what to say when people are suffering and facing difficulties.” Here are a few questions we might want to ask before we utter this myth anymore.

What do we mean by “everything”?

Let’s put an actual face on it. What about a Colorado Mesa University student who gets hit by a car in one of the four crosswalks between Orchard and North Avenues?

And what do we mean by “reason”? Do we mean actual reasons or some underlying cosmic fate or plan of God?

I think we usually imply this deeper, God-ordained reason. At Wednesday in the Word we brainstormed all the different, actual reasons why a CMU student might get hit in a crosswalk on 12th: distracted driver; drunk driver; driver texting; driver suffering medical emergency; driver thinking they are hitting the brake but accelerating instead; brake malfunction; driving at night and not seeing the student because he or she didn’t press the crosswalk button; distracted student; drunk student.

We can find numerous reasons why some terrible things might happen. But do we want/need to find a deeper reason for everything, is if God is at work creating traffic and pedestrian tragedies?

A more important question is how might the language of this myth implicate God in some of the lousy “everything” that occur?

How are people supposed to feel about God when we say this after their cancer diagnosis or the loss of a child/spouse or the loss of a job or the tragedy of a natural disaster?

And why do we feel the need to say (explain) anything at a difficult time in someone’s life?

Jason mentioned the story of Job last week. Job lost almost everything in one fell swoop. His wife told him he should curse God and die, but he hung in there; sat in the dirt covered with sores. And three of his friends got together to be with him. They were the “face of grace” Jason talked about last week. Initially, for a whole week, they got it right. “They sat with him on the

ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.” (Job 2:13)

Then Job said he didn't deserve this and wanted God to explain it. And they just couldn't help themselves. “Job,” they said one after another, you know that “everything happens for a reason. You must have done something wrong.” This goes on for 33 chapters! Let's just say they were NOT trained Stephen Ministers; they were no longer the “face of grace.” Silence and “I'm so sorry this happened to you or your loved one” is way more helpful than a myth like “Everything happens for a reason.” Are we sure we want to say this? Are we sure the Bible says this?

Ecclesiastes doesn't say “Everything happens for a reason” but “For everything there is a season.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1) Sometimes you can connect a reason to a person who is weeping or tearing something down. Sometimes you can find a reason for a war or the death of a friend. But sometimes you can't. Ecclesiastes (which means the Preacher) is stating the obvious: “A lot of different things happen at various times; some good and some not so good. There are cycles and periods of growth and dormancy. Emotions of joy and sorrow. Seasons of all kinds. Life is multi-faceted. We dance and embrace, give birth and say goodbye.” But he's talking less about God as a Causal Agent, and more about life on this ever-changing planet. He goes on to say a few verses later that “[God] has made everything beautiful in its time” (3:11), but he doesn't say God made all the ugly stuff happen. This is very close to what Paul is says in Romans 8.

Paul doesn't say “all things are good, because God is somehow the reason behind everything that happens.” He does say, “God can take everything and work it for good.” Actually he says, “All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28) And Paul states God's purpose right after this: God's purpose/plan is that we would be “conformed to the image of His Son.” (Romans 8:29) I firmly believe God is shaping and will shape our lives to look more and more like Jesus' life. I know God does and can take anything terrible life throws at those who love Him and, over time, use what is terrible and painful and difficult to mold us and make us more like Jesus.

But let's be careful not to inform people of this TOO soon – or feel like they need to hear it from us first. These truths from Romans 8 and other scriptures are best discovered by the individual going through the “everything” that's not so good. And they/we probably won't discover it until they're/we're down the road a bit, looking back.

As I was reading in my Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Day By Day Journal on Thursday night, this quote from Parker Palmer jumped out at me. Talking about the fall-like seasons of his life in which summer's abundance gave way to decline and decay, while also leading to the planting of seeds, he makes an observation. “In retrospect, I can see in my own life what I could not see at the time – how the job I lost helped me find work I needed to do, how the road closed sign turned me toward terrain I needed to travel, how losses that felt irredeemable forced me to discern

meanings I needed to know. On the surface it seemed that life was lessening, but silently and lavishly the seeds of new life were always being sown.” (in *Let Your Life Speak*)

A lot of things DO happen for a reason, but we don’t have a clue what that might be in the moment. In fact, we’re often flat-out wrong about what’s happening. Sometimes the mystery remains unsolved for years. So instead of needing to say “Everything Happens For a Reason” (and being wrong and unhelpful), how about if we find ways to declare with our lives and with our voices that “[Nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?” (Romans 8:39) That’s no myth! Even prison walls can’t separate someone from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Back to my friend from seminary. Todd Cioffi and others from Calvin College and Calvin Seminary have been offering college degree coursework since 2015 to Michigan inmates who apply for and get accepted into the program. Cohorts of 20 men are transferred to a nearby prison where they go through a five-year bachelors program and get a fully accredited liberal arts education with an emphasis in Ministry Leadership. Next year they will offer their first bachelor’s degrees. It is fully funded by outside donor support.

At Michael’s graduation last Saturday we got a real treat. Via live video feed, we got to see and applaud the 19 men who were receiving an Associate of Arts (degree). They will get their bachelors in 2021. Actually there were only 18 men up on the screen.

And that’s because Saulo Montalvo wasn’t with them anymore. Saulo was sentenced to life in prison without parole when he was only sixteen. But at some point a higher court ruling declared that a minor can’t be given a life sentence without parole. So he was retried and given the possibility of parole. And at the age of 39, just a few weeks ago, Saulo walked out of the prison near Grand Rapids. What none of us in the commencement audience knew was that Saulo was sitting with all the other graduates. He was recognized by the President of Calvin, stood to our thunderous applause, and walked across the arena with Michael and others to receive his diploma. This is how Todd described Saulo: “*Wonderful guy. Deep faith, filled with joy, and ready to serve. Complete transformation.*”

I’m still not comfortable saying “Everything Happens For a Reason” – and I’m guessing the person that Saulo committed the crime against years ago (or that person’s family) doesn’t need to hear something so hollow and shallow. But I can tell you this for sure: what happened to Saulo in the last several years happened for a reason. Here’s why and how it happened: the God of this universe loved Saulo and redeemed his life through the “face of grace” captured in people like Todd . . . SO THAT Saulo can tell others about the One who “works all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose” and the One who will never let anything or anyone separate us from His love in Jesus Christ.